

Visioning the Future: SVAG Study Day 13 October 2012

Summary of contributions & discussion

Opening remarks

The Lord Mayor:

Paid tribute to Sheffield's lively contemporary art scene and acknowledged the shortage of exhibition space in the city;

Said he is 110% behind SVAG's objective of improving access to the city's outstanding art collections, and is keen to help develop a longer term strategy for the city.

Kim Streets, Chief Executive of Sheffield Museums Trust:

Emphasized the challenges facing the Trust, following the reduction in Arts Council funding & consequent loss of 36 members of staff through redundancy;

Recognized that financial support from the council cannot be sustained at previous levels & that the Trust has to place greater emphasis on income generation;

Outlined plans focusing on digitization of archive material, and the development of a robust volunteer programme & sustainable workforce; and

Pointed to the importance of culture, in terms of inspiring people & motivating everyone to work together for a better future.

Mike Day, Trustee of Museums Sheffield said:

The arts are (& have been) underfunded in Sheffield but the Trust will fight hard to keep its three venues open;

The Trust now has to forge new partnerships & ways of working with local artists, businesses and universities;

Inclusion is vital; everyone in the city should have the best possible access to art & culture.

Janet Murray, Chair of Sheffield visual Arts Group:

Noted that many people share concerns about poor access to Sheffield's collections; Argued for the development of a 'user group' of stakeholders to stimulate debate and play a role in helping the Trust through its current difficulties.

The Workshops

Visual Art

Sian Brown, Curatorial Services Manager outlined the strengths & weaknesses of Sheffield's visual art collection, and noted that in terms of the future MS would like to focus on:

Raising money to assist with restoration of work in poor condition:

Interrogating work in the collection from the 1940s and 50s;
Developing the collection through long-term loans;
Exploring digital methods of displaying works in store;
Facilitating visits to the store.

Contributions from the floor included the importance of:

Documentation (including a digital catalogue) to the issue of widening access;
Restoration: funds must be identified to improve the condition of many of the works in store. The iconic status of the Graves may encourage donations.
Connection: partnerships are vital to the future of MS in the present circumstances, notably:
those with volunteers (who will be needed if MS is to develop & extend its activities, given recent redundancies), and
with contemporary artists working in the city, to document, display, and acquire their work.

Metalwork and Craft

Claire Starkie, Senior Curator, noted that while much of the metalwork collection is in store, it:

Is a designated collection with heritage status;
There are close partnerships with both Universities and with the Cutlers' Company;
Two major events are planned for 2013: *Design to Shine*, celebrating the centenary of the invention of stainless steel, & the *Galvanise* festival.

Emma Paragreen, of Sheffield Assay Office, explained that in addition to its role in testing metals:

The Assay Office works closely with MS & metalworkers in the local community;
Holds a collection of exemplary work; and is available for public access.

Discussion focused on proposals for:

The creation of a dedicated metalwork museum, presenting Sheffield through the medium of the collection;
A project mapping the collection virtually, through integrated voice, pictures & text;
Overcoming the arts/tools divide;
Developing partnerships such as that between the V&A and Stourbridge.

The Future of the Graves

Andrew Millroy, Head of Libraries, explained that:

The future of the Graves building, owned by Sheffield City Council, is key to what happens to the Graves Art Gallery, which is a tenant, occupying some 20% of the available space;
This is a listed building with major structural issues, including with the steel frame;

A succession of plans for its renovation have been prepared over the past decade, none of which have been implemented;

A working party is considering options; its proposals will be put to the council early in 2013.

These envisage renovation of the building with a continuing mixed library/gallery usage, and the introduction of new commercial functions to generate income.

Sian Brown noted that:

The Graves Gallery is a purpose designed gallery space but its top floor location presents difficulties in terms of visibility, public access, and moving large art works, and

Outlined a vision for it becoming a building showcasing art and culture.

Both speakers expressed optimism (7/10) re acceptance of the working party's proposals.

Discussion focused on:

Tensions and complementarities between the visions of MS and of Libraries;

The need for truly ambitious thinking about the building; and

The importance of public consultation over the proposals.

Projects

Daryl Bennett, SVAG, argued that:

Despite the difficult financial context, it is important to extend participation in the selection and scope of exhibitions, and

Outlined proposals for one suggested participatory project: *Sheffield in 100 Objects*.

Kirstie Hamilton, Museums Sheffield, outlined the MS approach to:

Project evaluation and feedback on exhibitions;

Working with schools, including Inset facilities for teachers,

External partnership & collaboration, which has been important for exhibitions such as *Restless Times*, and *The Family in Art'*, and

Engagement with contemporary work, as in the *Kid Acne* exhibition.

Discussion addressed:

The need for us all (politicians, the Trust, citizens) to work together to ensure our creativity as a city survives;

How to use limited display space dynamically, & options for 'virtual' projects;

The value of 'stories' in creating interest, and building identities.

For a detailed record of the meeting, or information on SVAG please email sheffvisarts@gmail.com